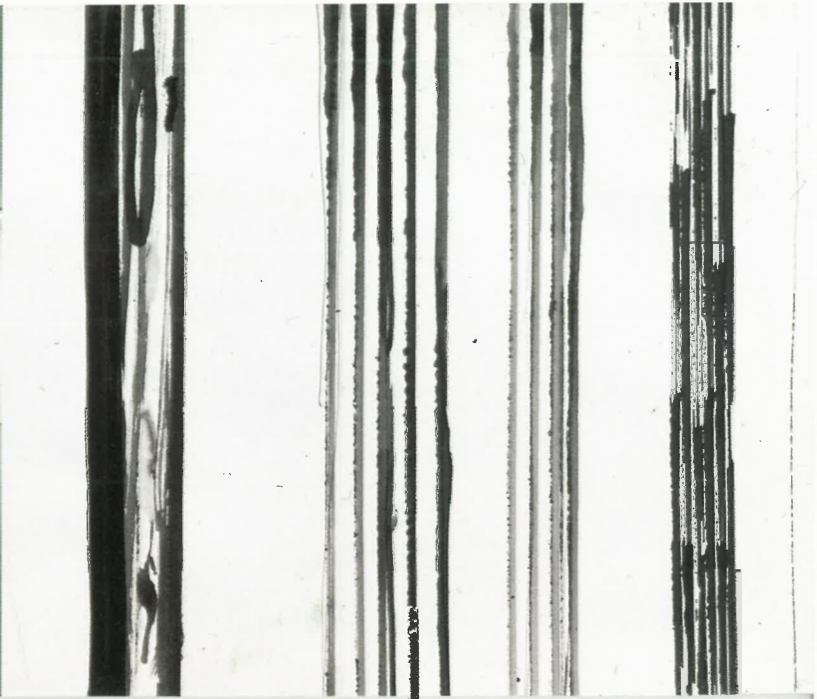


DIALOGUES: TODD NORSTEN /  
KRISTIN OPPENHEIM



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JANUARY 12 - MARCH 30, 1997

WALKER ART CENTER

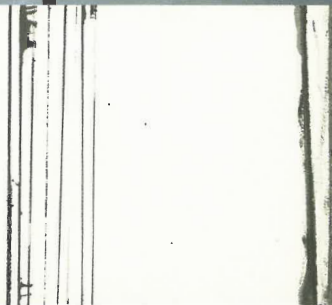
## THE SPACE BETWEEN

At first glance, the works of Todd Norsten and Kristin Oppenheim seem light years apart. Best known as a painter and printmaker, Norsten appears to be the more traditional of the two artists, apparently driven by an intense investigation of the sensuous qualities of abstract form. On the other hand, Oppenheim's most recent work — a series of nearly intangible sound installations that employ little more than the artist's own voice — seems to push away from formal concerns toward the dematerialization of the art object. Upon closer inspection, however, this clichéd dichotomy between form and concept collapses, leaving behind the constraints and limitations that such assumptions place on our view of art objects. If we look and listen carefully, we find that what binds these two artists together, if perhaps tenuously, is not a similarity of artistic means but a fascination with space.

In his book *The Poetics of Space*, philosopher Gaston Bachelard suggests that our experience of space is never neutral and resonates with a sensuous feeling that can be apprehended by the conscious, poetic imagination. Whether we are speaking about a house, a seashell, or even a chest of drawers, every space carries with it a particular set of associations that have been shaped by our personal experiences as well as our exposure to literary and artistic discussions of such spaces. An attic, for example, can evoke the gripping fear of a child's nightmare, the sweet wonder of a pleasant daydream, or numerous literary and artistic configurations with which we may be familiar. But in no way do these spaces remain neutral, for "space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor."<sup>1</sup>

When I first encountered one of Kristin Oppenheim's sound installations, it quickly became clear that just such a poetics of space was at work. Entering New York's 303 Gallery in the spring of 1996, I was confronted with a series of theatrical searchlights spinning around the room while a woman's voice slowly sang a fragment of a Jimi Hendrix song. The words "Hey Joe, where you goin' with that gun in your hand?" resonated throughout the room, circling in a languorous repetition that

Kristin Oppenheim Hush  
1994 sound installation at  
Villa Arson, Nice, France



Todd Norsten No title  
1996 ink on paper

mimicked the movement of the searchlights. Although trained as a visual artist, Oppenheim's spaces are often completely bare except for sets of audio speakers, which are at times the only visual clues that an artist might be at work. It is the sparseness of these installations that enables these spaces to be so thoroughly transformed by her voice. With very little to look at, and with the hypnotic repetition of her fragmented melody filling the air, it becomes clear that for Oppenheim space itself has become a pliable drawing surface on which to inscribe the sound of her own voice.

If Oppenheim draws with her voice, the texts she chooses to sing constitute the lines that make up these drawings. The neutral white cube of the gallery space takes on the mood and character of her songs as the amplified sound of her voice weaves its web throughout the room, filling every corner with the traces of the singer's melancholy, joy, or indifference. Oppenheim's texts are often derived from specific preexisting songs that are transformed in the process, as in the case of her installation *Hey Joe* (1996); but the artist also writes her own texts, as in *Shiver* (1993), where she replicates the feeling of a torch song with the words "Come on honey, squeeze me tight, Shine on, Shine on, Shine on." In each case, Oppenheim's lyrics transform the gallery, turning what at first appears to be an absence of the artist's hand into a palpable aural presence, thereby investing these spartan rooms with the emotional intensity of her own poetic vision.

For this exhibition Oppenheim has created a new installation entitled *Place Your Hand Where I Can't See* (1997). Like all of her sound installations to date, little is visible in the gallery. The artist has embedded four audio speakers into columns that have been constructed in the space. Each column has a table built into it and is surrounded by a set of stools, thereby inviting visitors to sit and listen to the sound of Oppenheim's voice as she sings a seemingly random set of non sequitur phrases: "It's no good trying . . . yes I can tell . . . to place your hand . . . that you can't be . . . where I can't see . . . what you pretend." As the song cycles through its text over and over again, it suggests in its repetition of

the lyrics a connection to the compulsive reiteration of vertical lines in the drawings of Todd Norsten, which share the space. Indeed, a similar strategy of engagement with the line — whether the line of a song or an ink line — unites these two disparate artists as they investigate their own very specific conceptions of space.

Todd Norsten has recently undertaken a series of untitled line drawings that are ultimately preoccupied with questions of space and reduce the act of drawing to its very essence — the mark on a surface. For this exhibition Norsten has installed his work in geometric grids consisting of anywhere from four to 16 drawings. The drawings are configured within a consistent set of parameters set by the artist to delimit the field of possibilities: each is made with ink on paper and employs only vertical lines. With these rigid parameters set in place, the surface of the paper becomes a laboratory where numerous spatial variations can occur as vertical lines are pulled down across the surface of the paper again and again, setting in motion a somewhat obsessive investigation of the thickness and duration of the mark as well as the spatial possibilities offered by such a narrow field of artistic practice.

I first viewed these works in the summer of 1996, in the artist's Minneapolis studio. As I worked my way through a stack of more than 50 drawings, I became intrigued by their "proto-cinematic" quality. The lines danced across the surface of the paper like figures in a children's flip book, making it increasingly clear that the repetition of these lines across an entire body of work manifests an affect that far outstrips the power of any single drawing. For in the repetition of vertical lines, these drawings became a record of a particular set of spatial and temporal transformations that Norsten has set into motion.

Norsten himself likens these drawings to photographs, suggesting that they offer an index of the movement of the artist's hand through a moment in space and time. Each line becomes an indelible record of a movement in space, the ephemeral residue of a now-absent hand. But it is not so much



Todd Norsten No title 1996 Ink on paper





Kristin Oppenheim  
Sail on Sailor 1994  
sound installation at 303  
Gallery, New York

the lines themselves that fascinate Norsten, but rather the space that lies between these lines. In effect, each line becomes a mere prop, a figure demarcating a space that is transformed with the introduction of each subsequent line on the surface of the drawing. In other words, each set of lines gives shape or life to a formerly shapeless and lifeless void. In this way, they conceptually mirror Oppenheim's voice as it gives a strange poetic life to the stark geometry of the gallery space. But the spatial resonance of these lines isn't simply contained within the edges of Norsten's drawing paper, for the vertical lines that compose these works define a spatial field that we ourselves inhabit every day, marking off our own contours from the world around us. This, in the end, is what Norsten seeks to investigate.

In the work of both Todd Norsten and Kristin Oppenheim, space loses its neutrality and takes on a poetic dimension as it is traversed by the artist. As we move our own bodies through the space of the gallery, what we encounter is the performative residue of two very disparate kinds of drawing. Whether in the recorded enunciations of the breath as it passes through the vocal chords, or in the trace of an ink line as it registers the movement of the hand, the space of the gallery is transformed by the imaginations of the artists, manifesting a very palpable "poetics of space."

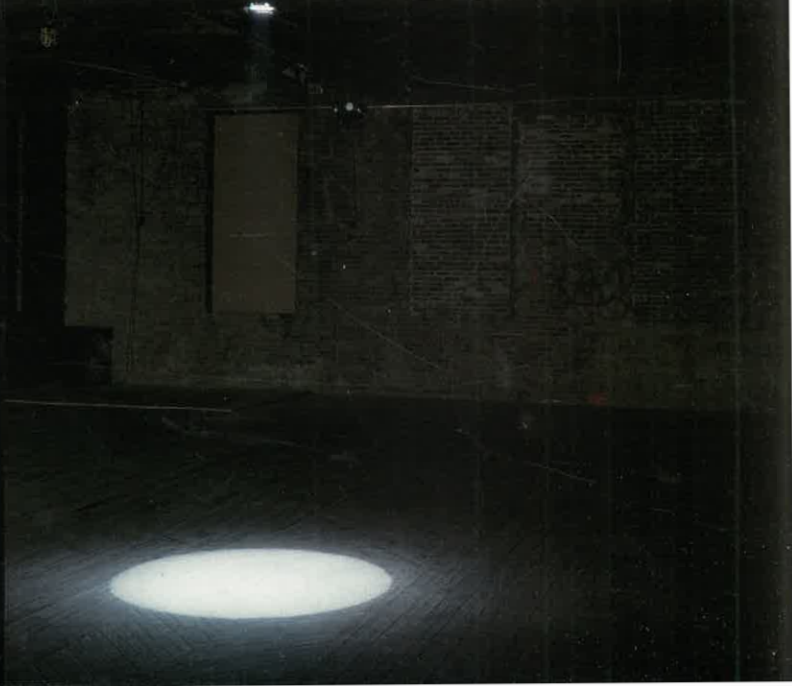
### DOUGLAS FOGLE

Curatorial Assistant

<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space . (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969)

I saw a man, on the uptown line,  
he's lookin' at the sky  
tappin' his feet to some . . . to some  
song,  
Come on now  
tap your shoes, tap your shoes  
to the one, one, two blues.  
Come on now  
tap your shoes, tap your shoes  
to the one, one, two blues.

Kristin Oppenheim Tap Your Shoes 1996  
sound/light installation at New York Kunsthalle



Hey Joe, where you goin'  
with that gun in your hand?  
Hey Joe, I said, where you goin'  
with that gun in your hand?  
Hey, hey Joe, I said.  
Hey, hey Joe, I said.

Kristin Oppenheim Hey Joe 1996  
sound/light installation at 303 Gallery, New York





## INTERVIEW

KRISTIN OPPENHEIM / DOUGLAS FOGLE  
NEW YORK, DECEMBER 1996

**DOUGLAS FOGLE:** I know that you went to graduate school in New York. Did you stay in New York because of the art world?

**KRISTIN OPPENHEIM:** I stayed there because I love New York, but also for the art world. I think it's important for an artist to live here at least for a little while. You don't have to live here forever, but there's a lot of information here. There are a lot of people that travel here from Europe, for instance, who you're able to meet if you get out of the house. It's a nice place to have a huge variety of relationships with art and with people, and there's absolutely the largest variety possible here. There's nowhere else like it that I know of.

**DF:** When did you complete your first sound piece?

**KO:** My very first one was done in 1992. At the time I had a very small, very claustrophobic studio at P.S.1 in New York. I didn't have much space. I did have a little tape recorder, though, and I was doing a lot of writing for myself at that time. At that point I was doing some text work and that's when I did a piece called *Wet Nurse*, which says "I want only fever . . . you give me fever . . ." Shortly after that I completed *Shake Me* (1992), which I did just for myself in a very experimental way. I didn't think of it as something I would show, as I wasn't actively participating in exhibitions at that point. The melody of *Shake Me* came from some place in my memory. I had no idea at the time where it was coming from. I did figure it out later, but at the time it was just a memory of a melody that I was singing as I went around town.

**DF:** Fragments of a melody that you remembered?

**KO:** Yes. And so I put my own words "shake me" over the melody, and I played it for my brother and various people. Then we decided to record it.

**DF:** When you were recording, did you imagine it would be installed as a sound piece somewhere?

**KO:** As soon as I finished it, *Shake Me* was installed in a group show at 303 Gallery in New York. I

was lucky to get a show right away.

**DF:** How do you derive the text for your sound installations? Are the lyrics appropriated from pop songs and then rearranged?

**KO:** No, not in every case. There are a few pieces I've done that come from my own references, but they all take after old torch songs, like "Come on, Honey, squeeze me tight." I wrote that, but it could have been from anyone. The majority of my material is pulled from specific sources.

**DF:** Are these sources specific to you? Are they random things that you come across that you like?

**KO:** I wouldn't say they're random. They started out as being some of my favorite things and now what I have to do is search for something that's interesting to me.

**DF:** Interesting in what way?

**KO:** It's a kind of instinct. I look for a text that's saying something that I want to play around with. I like to do different things. For a while I did quite a few love songs — sad, torchy, female stuff. But I've also done quite a bit of Syd Barrett of Pink Floyd fame because he was a great poet, dark and melancholic. I look for things that are ephemeral, as in *Sail on Sailor* (1994), where the text has to do with sailing far away. And I also look for text that has references to the body, as in *Shake Me or Cry Me a River* (1992). I try to play with the audience in that way, or have the voice draw in the person who enters the space.

**DF:** When someone goes into one of your spaces, there often is little there besides the sound.

**KO:** That works best with the sound pieces. I've tried coming up with ideas in the studio that bring different elements together and it's always a disaster. It always works much better with just the sound. Visual work can speak really strongly for itself and doesn't need the sound, and vice versa. But my next series is going to be visual and probably won't involve sound at all.

**DF:** There is an expectation in the gallery situation that when people walk in they're going to see

something. What's really interesting to me about your sound pieces is how you play with those expectations. Something's there, but it's not there. You don't see it, but you hear it.

**KO:** That interested me for a while, but I'm interested in going beyond that. That's why I like the installation that I'm doing at the Walker, *Place Your Hand Where I Can't See* (1997), because it's more interactive. Also, with the text, it's very important for me that people become a bit entranced with it. If they hang out in the space, if they like it, then they can become entranced; but if there's too much information in front of them, they're just going to read the information. If there's nothing much there, or if it's completely abstract, then it allows their own imaginations to kick in. That's what the pieces are about, having audiences complete them.

**DF:** Is repetition a part of the strategy then, like a mantra?

**KO:** Yes. It's just taking a moment and repeating it.

**DF:** Could you talk a little bit more about how you came to do the piece for this exhibition?

**KO:** It's an empty space, but I also had to work with Todd's drawings.

**DF:** How did that affect what you decided to do?

**KO:** It was challenging, that's for sure. It was very important to me for the two bodies of work to bounce off of each other. At first, I thought we'd have to completely divide the space, but considering that the exhibition is called *Dialogues*, I thought it was important to try to do something along with his work, and so it became a question of formal problem-solving. You can't put a speaker next to a drawing, you've got to get them off the wall; so I came up with two different ideas. The first idea was to build a room inside of the gallery, but I thought that was boring as I've done that before. Then I came up with the idea of the pillars, which are quite open and airy and work with the lines of the architecture. Nothing profound, just a formal, aesthetic decision, but a good one. I wanted to keep the space wide open because the room is

quite vast, especially with the big windows. I felt that the idea of cutting up the room would not be good for Todd's drawings. Opening up the space is the best thing you can do for his work and I'm very flexible. But I wanted my piece to be conceptual as well. I wanted to do something that was interactive and that challenged me.

**DF:** You've mentioned this interactive quality before. How do you see this work as interactive?

**KO:** I was thinking more about setting up a situation for people that wander in, having them participate in the piece a little bit, indirectly perhaps. So, it's like an absent performer. But having my voice in there is practically like being there, because the voice is speaking to whoever sits down or whoever wanders around the gallery space. For people who are interested, they can sit in the space and let the sound wash over them.

**DF:** How does the text play into this?

**KO:** The lyrics for *Place Your Hand Where I Can't See* are purposefully mixed up a bit. I skip sentences in this piece. The first sentence is on one side of the room and the next sentence is on the other side of the room, and it goes back and forth. "It's no good trying . . . yes I can tell . . . to place your hand . . . that you can't be . . . where I can't see . . . what you pretend." So the people who are going to get the whole thing are the ones who sit in the space and put it together.

**DF:** Do you like the open-ended nature of the text and the way it floats there in the space?

**KO:** Yes, but I'm also interested in how people watch each other. This piece in particular is definitely open-ended. The lyrics talk about placing your hand where I can't see it and about how you can't be what you pretend to be. You can't really define the meaning.

**DF:** Is the ephemeral something that you are attracted to?

**KO:** I think it's inherent in this work. I'm much more interested in the ephemeral, the poetic, and the abstract than something that's either didactic or theory-based.